The Importance of Parent's Intervention in Early Years

Nadine Jaafarawi

Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of parent involvement and intervention in early childhood education. What formulates the lock and key theory in early childhood programs is parental participation versus educational achievement. Upon the parents' vital involvement, it is perceived that social and cognitive development, aided by educators, will be significantly achieved. Furthermore, parent's early intervention is an added value to classrooms and schools, for it creates a dimension of involvement in the decisions which shape the children's education as a whole. Moreover, and due to parent/teacher cooperation in the classroom and at home, the child's interest in learning will be triggered, yielding other positive outcomes. Therefore, people must emphasize the parent's role in order to aid children's complex and evolving multi-cultural and global nature.

Keywords: parents, education, children, involvement, intervention, home environment, child

Historical Overview

In the nineteenth century, Abate Aporti (Barnard, 1838), a Catholic priest, interested in the establishment of elementary schools in Italy, contributed to the development of preschool and, more particularly, parental education which presents a further constructive point of view. According to Whipple (1929),

> We wish and expect children to be a very different race from their parents, but this must depend in a great measure upon the conduct of the parents themselves. While we educate children we ought not to lose sight of the parents. If those who were about children of tender years were virtuous, the great majority of children would grow virtuous likewise. Parents ought to abstain in the presence of their children from speaking ill of other people, as this is apt to engender contempt and anti-social feelings. Squabbles between father and mother, recriminations, hard words, tend to destroy filial respect". (p. 9)

Forecast thus by Plato, and developing very slowly during succeeding centuries, the preschool and parental education movement seems to have been somewhat more definitely launched about one hundred years ago. As the movement has progressed during the past century, the most evident growth appears to have been in the clearer definition of objectives in the education of young children and their parents, in a more sympathetic attitude toward parental problems and in improved methods of organization of procedures (Whipple, 1929).

We notice that before the 1960s, preschool teachers had little to do with parents as there was the view that the professionals were the experts in children's learning and development and parents should not interfere. It was observed that learning and teaching, having separate natures although identified as indistinguishable, were to be done by students and teachers respectively. In the 1960s, there was more communication, but it was rather "one way". The professionals used their expertise to inform and educate parents as if they were the only ones who had any knowledge or understanding about children. In the 1970s teachers became more aware of the

Nadine Jaafarawi, Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics, English Department, Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon.

value of communicating with parents, but it was limited to the narcissistic view of enhancing their own status as professionals with specialized skills and knowledge. The 1980s was the decade of consumerism. Parents became "consumers of a service". So the focus of communication was more about meeting the demands and wishes of parents, which meant they were encouraged to discuss policies and procedures and be part of any consultation about their children's welfare and learning. Parents' role was prominent in the 1990s, when they became recognized as experts of their own children and should actively participate in discussions and decision making about their children's experiences in the early years settings. Indeed, participation was actively requested, especially in preschool and nursery school. In the 2000s, the climate changed again. Increasing numbers of mothers working full-time meant that they have less time and energy to participate actively alongside practitioners. Single parenthood has massively increased, which placed extra pressures on those families. Alongside these sociological changes, there have been an increasing number of legal regulations about the role and responsibilities of professionals, directing and formalizing their relationships with parents. This has placed a requirement on practitioners to have the skills of communication as never before (Hughes & Read, 2012). Nowadays, as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century it seems that it is getting more and more difficult to sustain good working relationships. The question is: do we want our children cared for and nurtured or simply trained and educated?

Importance of Parental Involvement

Prior to entering school, all children experience significant learning experiences which affect their subsequent progress at school (Garry, 1963). The primary agent providing this experience is the family. Here I should stop to clarify what I mean by the term "parents". Families have changed so much in the last thirty years that young children are not necessarily being brought up and cared for just by their birth parents (Hughes & Read, 2012). According to the Guidance of the Standards for the Award of Early Years Professional Status, the definition of parents includes "Mothers, fathers, legal guardians and primary carers who look after children" (Hughes & Read, 2012, p. 6).

Researchers, such as Feuerstein, Jones and Marcon (2000, 2001, 1999, cited in Brewer, 2004) continue to support the importance of parent involvement in the success of children in school. Furthermore, Hampton and Mumford (1998, cited in Brewer, 2004) demonstrate that even parents who participate infrequently in school activities can make a big difference in their children's academic lives compared to those who do not participate at all. Unfortunately, many parents do not see how their involvement at school could possibly benefit their children.

There is increasing and consistent evidence that parental participation is the key to sustaining educational achievement in early childhood programs. Honig (1975) presented the outcomes of a rural Head Start program, where parents participated in a weekly parent education group with specific emphasis on language training for their children. Consequently, a survey of Head Start parents has found a positive relationship between extensive parent participation and children's scores which reflect better task orientation, academic achievement, verbal intelligence, and self-concept. Definite conclusions were deducted from this program:

1. The parent is curriculum creator and educator. They are responsible for the development of their children. The parent is also a responsible person by program personnel.

2. Efforts to involve parents with their young child's learning and education must be varied to meet parental and child developmental needs.

3. Patience is a virtue. Some parent involvement efforts take a lot more "give" before they "take."

4. Parent involvement means not only lessons, but a way of working with parents, children, and lessons. Flexibility is the key concept in changing and adapting task ingredients and games so that household resources, and parent/child motivational and skill levels are taken into account.

5. Social development outcomes are very important. As Zigler (1970, cited in Honig, 1975) has noted, more important than cognitive acquisition is the fact that many parents have had experiences which have alienated them from our society. He also stresses the need to give parents and children experiences that will help them to actualize themselves within the social framework.

6. Parent involvement is not only for the poor. Parenting skills come in all sizes and shapes and degrees in all families. Many of us could use more of these skills (Honig, 1975, p. 82).

In short, parent involvement is essential for the social and cognitive development of the child, aided by educators. Preschoolers need to feel secure and prepared for the learning process, so as to make the teaching process easier and more applicable.

Achievements of Parents' Early Intervention

In an article written in 2002, Mattingly, Pristin, Mckenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar, from San Diego University, stressed the notion that parent involvement is correlated with higher student academic achievement, better student attendance, and more positive student and parent attitudes toward education.

As a committed group of reflective practitioners concerned with both institutional development and professional development, staff members at Pen Green, a nursery in London, naturally developed a commitment to the research process in 1995. Practitioners were very much concerned with the "researching child" capable of performing "heroic feats" (Whalley, 2001, p. 57). The staff at the nursery involved parents in their children's learning project—a three year project. Following the constructivist approach, the project has affirmed the very strong belief that parents were committed to, interested in and excited by their children's learning. Most parents reported significant changes in the way that they responded to their children. All the parents commented on their increased understanding of their children's potentials. Most reported that being involved in the project had changed the way that they selected books and kinds of toys for their children.

This goes along with what Swick (1991) stressed on, which is the notion of parent efficacy and its contribution to a successful teacher-parent partnership. He explains that this sense of efficacy is related to a series of attributes that comprise parents' self-image, control of self, one's developmental orientation, and interpersonal involvements. Those four attributes enable parents to carry out beneficial exchanges within the family and with their supportive persons who are the teachers (Swick, 1991). This will lead parents to gain the sense of self-confidence and maturation which enables them to realize their role in supporting, guiding, and teaching children. Parents will observe the results through their children's scholastic achievement. There were many steps taken to involve parents with their child's education, such as Family Literacy Project and Parents as Teachers (PAT) project (Swick, 1991) that helped to examine and support parent-child relationships.

In fact, parents add a dimension to classrooms and schools when they become involved in the decisions that shape their children's education. For further assertion Swick (1991) included some additional examples of parents' influence in improving schools:

• Support in decreasing class size;

- Improvements in teacher-parent relationships;
- Increases in school attendance;
- Improvements in facilities;
- Additions of learning materials and resources. (p. 115)

Nancy Schulman and Ellen Birnbaum (2007) are two gifted educators who know the world of children and parents inside out. In their book *Practical Wisdom for Parents* they stress the role that a parent plays in the life of the preschooler:

> As a parent of a preschooler, it's time that you will be communicating with your child's teachers more frequently than at any other stage in his/her educational life. An early childhood school cannot effectively meet the needs of young children without good communication with parents. You know your child best, and you've been her first teacher. In order to fully understand your child, a teacher must learn from you and come to a shared understanding in the best interests of your child. (Schulman & Birnbaum, 2007, p. 53)

Since the child is the center of our attention, Gibson and Nassef (2013) noted that early intervention is very healthy in case the teacher has any concerns about a child's development. They suggested the effective ways to approach this subject with parents who are non-threatening and non-invasive. It starts by collecting data, discussing findings as a teaching team, calling a meeting with parents, and finally holding the meeting. It is noteworthy mentioning that some parents aren't cooperative enough, and it is essential for teachers to acknowledge such a fact.

Parent/Teacher Cooperation

The notion of parents and professionals working together on curriculum issues seemed a fairly radical idea when Froebel Early Education Project was conceptualized during the early 1970s (Whalley, 2001). Professionals gain confidence from discussing and articulating their practice in an open way with parents. It is this process of sharing ideas about child development theories and also listening to parents' detailed information about their own children that helps teachers to articulate their pedagogy more clearly. Though at the beginning of the twenty-first century, parents' contribution to their child's education has become valued, parents are still viewed by many practitioners as "helpers" rather than as "equal and active partners" (Whalley, 2001, p. 58). Unless practitioners truly value the contribution made by the parents, parents will continue to take on this less powerful role.

Below are cases when the different attributes of the parents come into play:

A-The educated parent:

New teachers, in particular, feel uneasy teaching students of highly educated parents who may lack the sensitivity to understand the vulnerability of a new teacher. Though these behaviors don't apply to all educated parents, unfortunately some teachers have reported that some educated parents can be demanding and aggressive (Fuller & Olsen, 1998).

B-The indifferent parent:

Teachers have found it frustrating to work with a parent who seems indifferent to their efforts. Fuller and Olsen (1998) support this by giving the example of Melinda, a thirty-year-old kindergarten teacher who teaches in Newark, New Jersey, a large city with typical urban problems. She has felt frustrated over the parent's lack of involvement and interest in their children's involvement and school work. She feels it diminishes her job as a teacher when she cannot follow through her commitment to children by connecting with parents. Consequently,

we realize that we should ultimately accept the fact that, despite our efforts to reach out to parents, some will not be there for us.

C-Working parents:

Today, parents may be more isolated and vulnerable than in previous generations. The extended family which once provided psychological support has largely disappeared. In most two-parent households, both parents work. Today's parents, as Fuller and Olsen (1998) suggest, are enlightened about childrearing in contrast to their parents. They clearly have more access to literature on the subject. But they have less first-hand knowledge of children. When both parents work, they not only have less time with their children, they also have less familiarity with their children's friends, and so they have limited knowledge of the range of socially acceptable behavior. Consequently, teachers today are often called upon to provide support for confused parents (Fuller & Olsen, 1998; Whalley, 2001). Fuller and Olsen quote Rachel's opinion, who teaches English to special education students in a large, racially mixed suburban high school. Rachel notices the lack of maturity on the part of parents, she comments: "they simply don't know how to be parents. They don't know how to set limits; they don't know the importance of consistency" (Fuller & Olsen, 1998, p. 95). Her reaction to what parents don't know is one of annoyance with what she feels is a lack of parental responsibility. She felt her students were being short-changed because of the parents' ignorance about their responsibilities. On the other hand, we find other teachers to be more empathic towards parents who were unsure about how to cope with their children. They have an easier time communicating with parents, where they find it difficult to hear negative news about their child even when they ask the teacher to tell the truth (Hughes & Read, 2012).

D-Importance of parental perspectives:

Parents' feelings about school should be paid attention to as their attitudes toward school influence their children's attitudes and affect their behavior in class as well (Seligman, 2000); not to mention that when parents demonstrate a supportive attitude about school, it has a beneficial effect on teachers. It makes them feel valued, increasing teacher retention as a result (Newman, 1994, cited in Fuller & Olsen, 1998).

It is worth mentioning that when teachers become parents, they understand the profound attachment parents can have to their children. Although these teachers lack actual experience as a parent, awareness of a parents' attachment to a child may help the teacher to understand how it can affect the parents' perspective.

So we may conclude that evidence shows that school personnel should involve parents in the academic learning of their children as it results in several positive outcomes in the child's interest.

Effect of Home Environment on the Child

The home environment has a great influence on the child's life in its general atmosphere, as well as, its equipment (Whipple, 1929). There are several risk factors that may contribute to the family's deterioration and to the child's failure in school. Swick (1991) lists some risk factors that are often faced by parents and children, such as: poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, alcohol, drug abuse, family pathologies, poor health care, low support resources and unemployment.

It is critical to recognize that while these risk factors affect the lives of many families, they do not eliminate the innate goodness of each child and parent affected, strengthening teacher awareness of at-risk families who confront even the most serious problems in negative ways. That is why Swick (1991), along with others (Schulman & Birnbaum, 2007; Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010), stress that early childhood

teacher-parent partnerships can play a major role in preventing high-risk child and family situations from emerging, as well as, a substantive role in resolving risk conditions that already exist.

In developing partnerships with at-risk parents, Swick (1991) hinted at the teachers' need to attend to several skills and strategies:

a-Awareness of the multiple risks that parents of young children may experience.

b-Insight into the dynamics of how at-riskiness influences the lives of parents and children.

c-Understanding of the specific at-risk parent-child situations that exist in their classroom.

d-Sensitivity to the feelings and position of at-risk parents.

e-Strategies that are particularly relevant to the involvement and support of at-risk parents.

f-Alliances with formal and informal professional and community resources for use in support of at-risk parents.

g-Communication system with at-risk parents that facilitates their development as well as that of their children.

A substantial body of work in school aged children has established a relation between parent involvement in children's schooling and children's academic achievement. In contrast, there is much less research about parent involvement in preschool, and little is known about factors that influence the earliest stages of parent involvement. So more research is needed on this relation in preschool, given the importance of emergent academic development at this age. This goes in alignment with a study done by Arnold, Zeljo and Doctoroff (2008), who examined the relation between parent involvement in preschool and children's pre-literacy skills. The study showed that greater parent involvement was associated with stronger pre-literacy skills.

As an application to what this study examines, examples from around the world will be used to support this thesis:

Parents' involvement has been also raised in the educational institutions of Turkey and an approach centered on the child has been utilized. This curriculum was reviewed between 2002 and 2006. The current curriculum which has been followed in Turkey since 2006 is a curriculum based on child-centered developmental goals and prioritizing parent involvement issues. Dr. Can-Yasar (2011), an assistant professor at Afyon Kocatepe University, emphasized the importance of parent involvement as it will ensure continuance of education. In the Ministry of Education 2006 curriculum, it was highlighted that parents' awareness in preschool education should be raised. In this curriculum, parent involvement in preschool education has six components, which are parent education activities, parent communication activities, parents' participation in educational activities, home visits and activities, individual meetings, and involvement in the administration and decision making process. According to the Ministry of Education 2006 curriculum, educators should specify in their yearly and daily plans in which activities are to call for parent involvement (Can-Yasar, Inal, Uyanik, & Kandir, 2011). In other words, the historical development process of preschool curricula should be examined regularly, based on various models implemented in different countries, in order to meet the needs of the society, characteristics of children's age and development, and their needs and interests. All these developments have proved influential in ensuring permanence and continuance in preschool education as well as in enhancing the quality of education.

In China, Lau, Li and Rao (2012) conducted a study that developed and validated on instrument called the Chinese Early Parental Involvement Scale (CEPIS) that can be widely used in both local and international contexts to assess Chinese parental involvement in early childhood education. Responses revealed that Chinese

parents practiced more home-based involvement than preschool-based involvement. Further analyses also revealed that parental involvement differed as a function of parents' marital status and employment status.

Also in Sweden, Markstorm (2011) explored the face-to-face interactions between parents and teachers in parent-teacher conferences in the Swedish preschool. Her study governed parents towards becoming "good enough preschool parents" who are cooperative and able to categorize and label their own children, as the analysis showed that parents take control in order to overcome institutional barriers to parents' involvement. Throughout the study, Markstorm (2011) pointed out that the Swedish curriculum for the preschool stressed on the importance of communication and talk as a tool to construct a good relation between home and preschool and to achieve different institutional goals. The interplay between parents and teachers, both in everyday talk and during parent-teacher conferences, is said to be concerned with children's development, learning and well-being both at home and at preschool.

People must refocus parenting in order to help global interconnectedness as both opportunity and welcome challenge. The idea of "raising global children" is the subject of an interactive book that Berdan and his colleague have been researching for the past two years. Their intension is to create awareness and issue a call for action to American Families across all income levels and geography. It is designed by parents and for parents seeking to open up a child's world to a future bright with global possibilities.

References

Arnold, D. H., Zeljo, A., & Doctoroff, G. L. (2008). Parent Involvement in Preschool: Predictors and the relation of involvement in preschool: Predictors and the relation of involvement to preliteracy development. *School Psychology Review, 37,* 74-90.

Barnard, H. (1838). Moral education. *Connecticut Common School Journal, 1*(1).

Brewer, J. A. (2004). *Introduction to early childhood education: Preschool through primary grades* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Buckley, C. K., & Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J. (2010). Father involvement and coparenting behavior: Parent's non-traditional beliefs and family earner status as moderators personal relationships. *Journal of the International Association for Relationship Research, 17*, 413-431.

Can-Yasar, M., Inal, G., Uyanik, O., &Kandir, A. (2011). A general overview of early childhood education and parent involvement activities implemented in Turkey. *International Journal of Academic Research, 3*(6), 28-31.

Fuller, M. L., & Osen, G. (1998). *Home-school relations: Working successfully with parents and families.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Garry, R. (1963). *The psychology of learning.* New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education, Inc.

Gibson, C., & Nassef, R. (2013). Sharing developmental concerns with parents. *Developmental Assessment, 35*(6), 214.

Honig, A. S. (1975). *Parent involvement in early childhood education.* Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Hughes, A. M., & Read, V. (2012). *Building positive relationships with parents of young children: A guide to effective communication.* London: Routledge.

Lau, E. Y. H., Li, H., & Rao, N. (2012). Exploring parental involvement in early years in China: Development and validation of the Chinese early parental involvement scale (CEPIS). *International Journal of Early Years Education, 20,* 405-421.

Markstorm, A. (2011). To involve parents in the assessment of the child in parent-teacher conferences: A case study. *Early Childhood Education Journal* [On-line serial], *3*(30), 465-474.

Mattingly, D. J. R., Pristin, R., Mckenzie, T. L., Rodriguez, J. L., & Kayzar, B. (2002). The case of parent involvement programs. *Review of Educational Research, 72*(4), 78-88.

Schulman, N., & Birnbaum, E. (2007). *Practical wisdom for parents: Raising self-confident children in the preschool years.* New York: Random House.

Schuman, J. H., & Stenson, N. (Eds.). (1974). *New frontiers in second language learning.* Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers.

Seligman, M. (2000). *Conducting effective conferences with parents of children with disabilities: A guide for teachers.* New York: The Guilford Press.

Swick, K. J. (1991). *Teacher-parent partnerships to enhance school success in early childhood education.* Washington, D.C.: National Education Association.

Whalley, M. (2001). *Involving parents in their children's learning.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Whipple, G. M. (1929). *The twenty-eighth yearbook of the national society for the study of education: Preschool and parental education.* Illinois: Public School Publishing Company.